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Brooke, John

Thoughts on the extension
of the franchise

Huddersfield

1859

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THOUGHTS
ON
THE EXTENSION
OF
THE FRANCHISE.

BY
JOHN BROOKE, ESQ.,
D.L. AND J.P. FOR THE WEST RIDING OF YORKSHIRE.

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THOUGHTS ON THE FRANCHISE.

ON reading the Debates in the House of Commons, on Lord Derby's Reform Bill, I was surprised to find that the speeches were so little of a suggestive character; and that the question was mainly argued with reference to the reduction of a few pounds, more or less, in the qualifications required for the exercise of the Franchise, in Counties and Boroughs. Nearly all the speakers expressed a wish to admit a larger proportion of the working classes into the constituency; but, at the same time, were desirous to guard against their obtaining more than a reasonable amount of political influence. Now I have always been of opinion that the working classes have not a fair share in the representation of the country; and being persuaded that no mere lowering of the franchise can satisfy all the requirements of the case, I endeavoured, if possible, to discover a plan which, whilst meeting

the just claims of all, would avoid—what most deprecate—the preponderance of numbers over property and intelligence. The scheme I have devised is satisfactory to my own mind, and ought, I venture to think, to be so to every one who does not treat the franchise as a party question, but desires to place it on a sound and permanent basis. Whilst it would admit the working classes, as a body, to such an amount of political power as they can fairly expect, it would not disturb that balance of interests on which the healthy action of our Constitution so mainly depends. My views have been generally stated, in the course of conversation, to several friends, both in and out of Parliament, of all shades of political opinion, as my object is not party but public good; and, at their suggestion, I now commit my opinions to the press.

My own impression was that my idea, with respect to the plan presently to be detailed, was purely original; for I had never heard it propounded orally, nor had I met with it in print till very recently,—when, on the occasion of my mentioning the subject to a very influential and highly talented member of the House of Commons, he informed me that he believed a somewhat similar principle had been enunciated in a pamphlet, re-published last year by Messrs. Longman & Co. A copy of this publication he was good enough to

forward me for perusal: it is entitled, "*The Franchise, and Voting by Ballot, considered and explained*," by Mr. William Atkinson, of London. The author very ably discusses, in this work, the principle which ought, in his opinion, to regulate the exercise of the Franchise; and he illustrates his argument by copious extracts from authorities both ancient and modern. His plan would remodel the whole constituency, giving (1) a first-class qualification to counties; (2) a qualification to cities and corporate towns; (3) a second-class qualification to counties; (4) and lastly, electoral districts privileged to return representatives chosen by universal suffrage. To each of these four divisions he proposes to give power to return one-fourth of the total number of members of the House of Commons: and thus, he maintains, each class would be fully represented—no one would be too strong for the rest,—whilst the people would be admitted to universal suffrage. Mr. Atkinson simply states and illustrates his principle, and purposely avoids entering into particular details.

Whilst I agree, in great measure, with this author as to his principle, I object to the mode in which he proposes to carry it out. According to his proposition, each of the four classes would have its own member to represent its own interests; whereas my object is not to separate the

classes, but to provide that all—the higher, the middle, and the working portion of the population—should vote in common in the three kinds of constituencies which my plan would sanction ; so that the member returned for any particular place or district would not be the representative of any special class or party, but would be elected by the majority, in a mixed constituency, and would endeavour to legislate for the good of all.

Now my plan would not disturb the existing arrangements in counties, nor yet in boroughs, with the exception of requiring the residence of the voter within the limits of the borough, and also of admitting lodgers to the exercise of the franchise. The question, therefore, is narrowed to the consideration of the best mode to be adopted for the admission of the working classes to their proper share of the elective franchise, without destroying that fair balance of power, which is the very essence of the British Constitution.

It has always appeared to me that there are very serious objections to be urged, in the present state of our working population, against the unlimited exercise of the franchise. Political power is a prize to be earned, as all other prizes, by certain qualifications. If all men felt correctly, or reasoned justly, this would not be necessary, but it must be manifest to all, except the most casual observers, that there are too

many who show, by their conduct, an utter want of self-respect, and an entire absence of any desire for educational improvement, or the cultivation of industrial habits. To admit such persons to the exercise of the political power claimed for them, by the advocates of Universal Suffrage, would be surely a great mistake. Whilst in according to every one, the power he is qualified to exercise, we should take care that political privileges, as all other privileges, should be so offered as to operate for the elevation of the people. If a qualification, therefore, be required, which shall stimulate the working man to an upward tendency—which shall lead him to aspire to rent a more respectable dwelling, and to occupy a higher position among his fellows,—this desire to rise will induce him to exercise frugality, and a thoughtful care in the management of his affairs : it will give him an object, and in working for the attainment of it, his character will be gradually strengthened and improved : and when, ultimately, he attains his end, he will very justly experience a proper pride in his success. If you can make a man feel that there is a present gain in sobriety and prudence—that he can secure not only more social comfort, but also a measure of political power, by good, steady conduct,—then you will give him a wholesome self-respect, which will act as a predisposing cause to lead him to the

right discharge of those higher moral duties, which it must be the aim and desire of every true philanthropist to advance, as far as possible, by political arrangements.

This elevation of the character of the working man, would be attended with a good result, not only as it regards himself and his family, but also as it respects the exercise of that franchise which is demanded for him. He would be qualified to give a more intelligent and thoughtful attention to the claims and merits of the candidates, seeking to represent his district. With that freedom from passion and prejudice, which usually results from education and good conduct, he would not be so liable to be led astray by mere agitators. He would be better prepared to appreciate and choose men of sense, education, and talent, as his representatives; men worthy by their good judgment, their upright conduct, their disciplined minds, and their political knowledge, to occupy, with advantage to their country, the honourable position of legislators; who would carry weight in the House; and take a large and comprehensive view of questions relating to social progress, national advancement, and foreign policy.

On these accounts, I think it would be more prudent to require certain qualifications for the exercise of the franchise, than to admit the principle of Universal Suffrage. Bearing in mind,

therefore the grand truth, that PROPERTY, COMMERCE, and LABOUR ought, each and all of them, to have their fair and legitimate share in the representation, I now proceed to state the mode in which this may, in my judgment, be most advantageously effected.

By common consent, the British community is divided into three classes, viz.—(1) the Upper Class, consisting principally of holders of landed property; (2) the Middle Class, chiefly engaged in commercial pursuits; and (3) the Working Class, who live by manual labour. The upper class is, in a great measure, represented in Parliament by county members, and the middle class by borough members; but there is no constituency that can be said to represent the working class: and as it must be conceded that this third class has good claims to be represented, it is necessary, that some plan should be devised for safely admitting them to the enjoyment of their rights.

Now it is obvious that the present mode of electing members—whatever alteration may be made in the Franchise—cannot give that fair representation of Property, Commerce, and Labour, which all right-minded men, of every political party, wish to see established. I would, therefore, after much deliberation, propose that another constituency be formed, to be called the DISTRICT CONSTITUENCY.

In the County Franchise I would suggest no alteration, but would allow all now possessing a vote for a county to retain it.

The only change I would make in the Borough would be to give the franchise to all *bonâ fide* lodgers, above the age of twenty-one, paying not less than four shillings per week, and having occupied apartments within the borough, one year prior to being put on the Register, and who must have resided in a house of £15 rental, and taking in only one lodger. In case two lodgers in the same house should claim to be put on the Register, then the rental must be not less than £20; and so on—£5 per annum increase of rental being required for every lodger, over and above the £10 requisite to give the tenant the right of voting. Should a female rent the house, then the £10 must be similarly considered; and if a female occupy a room or rooms, she must, in like manner, be reckoned as a lodger.

The clause in the Act of 1832, which gives the privilege of voting to all £10 occupiers, residing within seven miles of the borough, I would repeal, and require every voter for a borough to reside within the precincts of it, and every district voter to live within his district; not allowing either to vote both for the district and the borough.

With respect to the *new constituency* to be called the DISTRICT, I would propose that householders, occupying a house, of a rental value of £5 and upwards, and not qualifying for a borough, also *bonâ fide* lodgers, above the age of twenty-one, paying not less than 2s. 6d. per week, and residing in a house of £7 10s. rental, should be qualified to vote, if their residence should have commenced one year previous to the entry of their names on the Register. If two lodgers, then the rental to be £10; and so on—£2 10s. extra rental being required for every lodger, over and above the £5 conferring the franchise on the tenant of a house. If a lodger paying 2s. 6d. per week, and living within a borough or market town, claim to have a district vote, he must reside in a house rented at not less than £8 15s. per annum. If two lodgers, £2 10s. extra; and so on for every additional lodger. The same rule should apply if the house be tenanted by a female; and a female lodger should be counted as one of the lodgers.

The rental of houses is considered with reference to the qualifications of lodgers, in order to ensure the respectability of the voter; and as rentals for the same accommodation are always higher in boroughs and market towns than in the country, a proportionate difference is made in the condition of the respective qualifications.

The whole of England and Wales, then, should be formed into districts, embracing a larger or

smaller area, in proportion to the amount of population. There would be little difficulty in accomplishing this, as in every part of England there are divisions already existing, called Hundreds or Wapentakes, or known by some other distinctive name; and, even if this were not the case, a certain number of parishes might be united, and a name given to the district thus formed, within which any man above the age of twenty-one, of sound mind, and untainted with crime, renting a house of £5 per annum, or paying 2s. 6d. a week for his lodgings, would be entitled to the exercise of the franchise.

As it does not appear desirable to increase the number of members in the House of Commons, I would recommend that the three different constituencies should each have, as nearly as possible, one-third of the whole, after deducting the members sent by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, together with two which I propose should be returned by the London University, and two by some other literary or scientific institution already being, or hereafter to be, incorporated.

Lord John Russell's bill, of 1854, would have disfranchised places now returning members, so as to leave sixty-three seats available for representatives of new constituencies. I am not prepared to say what boroughs should cease to be represented in Parliament, in order to admit new

members for the District Constituencies. This would require very grave consideration; but any difficulty would be diminished by the fact, that although some boroughs would be disfranchised, yet NO VOTERS would lose their franchise, as they would still have votes for the district within which their borough was situated.

From the foregoing remarks it will be seen, that the same individual may, as at present, if he possess the proper qualifications, have a vote for a borough and also for a county; or, a vote for a district and also for a county. But no one could have a vote for county, borough, and district. Nor could he have a vote for a borough and also for a district; for if he resided in a house, in a borough, of £10 and upwards rental, he could only vote for the borough, and would be debarred from voting for the district, whatever qualifications he might possess. But all persons residing within a borough, whose rental was £5 and under £10, would vote not for the borough, but for the district in which such borough was situate.

An important feature in this scheme is, that no member would be the representative of any particular class, but of a county, a borough, or a district;—all classes would vote together in every constituency. There would be no division of classes: the effect would be, as nearly as possible, that all classes would vote for counties but the

influence of the higher class would preponderate. And similarly all would vote for boroughs and districts; in the former of which the influence of the middle, and in the latter, of the working class, would chiefly prevail.

Again, my proposition does away with the anomaly alluded to by Lord Stanley, in his speech to his constituents at King's Lynn, wherein he says, "To give one man a vote because he lives within a certain line, separating the borough from the county, and to take it away because he lives beyond it, is not to be defended on principles of reason and justice." In the same speech his Lordship remarks, "it is idle to suppose you can avoid that question"—alluding to disfranchisement, which he calls—"the most perplexing of all questions."

The plan I suggest, would, I think, meet this "most perplexing question," as although it would render necessary the disfranchisement of some boroughs, yet it would not deprive a single individual, within those boroughs, of the privileges of the franchise.

Another advantage to be noticed is, that all other descriptions of franchise, such, for instance, as those which are called *fancy franchises*, would be rendered unnecessary; for surely any one who could claim under any of these, ought to be enabled to live in a £5 house, or to pay 2s. 6d. a week for his lodging.

The scheme is also wholly enfranchising, and in no case disfranchising to any person now possessing a vote; whilst it would admit a larger number of the working classes to the exercise of the elective franchise, than either Lord John Russell's or Mr. Bright's bills; with a much safer guard against numbers swamping property.

I think it would also carry out Mr. Bright's views, as expressed by him in the House of Commons, early in April, much better than his own bill. In the speech referred to, Mr. Bright says, that "in the New Parliament, he hopes or presumes that some Government will bring forward, and pass, a moderate but substantial measure of Reform, such as will place it in the power of every man,—every malcontent, if indeed there should be any left,—to say, that although Parliament does not exactly represent the people at large, IT IS SO FAIR AND JUST A REPRESENTATION OF ALL THE GREAT INTERESTS OF THE COUNTRY, that during our life time, at least, we may never be called on again to discuss any question connected with the Reform of the House of Commons."

It would also meet the requirements of Sir J. W. Ramsden, who, in his speech at Leeds, said he wished such a measure to be passed as "would not allow numbers to swamp property, nor property to preponderate over numbers."

Moreover, it would harmonize with the opinion of a Conservative candidate, who, in addressing a constituency, said, he would "give the working classes neither more nor less than their fair share of political power; and seeing that the community is divided into three great interests, property, commerce, and labour, he would admit to the franchise as many of the working class, as would give labour its full share in the whole electoral body."

Again, Mr. Sidney Herbert recently expressed himself thus: "Now what was the great object of a new Reform Bill? I thought it was to extend the borough franchise, so as to take in the industrious, sober, and well-conducted of the working classes. . . . What I wish to see is, a Bill which shall extend the suffrage to the better part of the working classes. At the same time, I do not wish to see such a numerical preponderance given to any one class, as will enable them to swamp all others."

Once more, Mr. D'Israeli says: "As the working classes generally are persons respectable for their industry, for their intelligence, and for their moral and social virtues, I should disapprove of any reconstruction of the electoral body, which did not offer a fair proportion of avenues for their admission."

Many other eminent persons have admitted that, in order to the settlement of this question, there must necessarily be a certain re-distribution of seats.

I am quite aware that great improvements may be made in carrying out the details of the measure I propose; but my object will be gained if it only suggest to members of the House of Commons, of all parties, when the Reform question is again brought forward, matter for consideration and discussion. Men of all political creeds have, in their election addresses, pronounced the opinion, that more of the working-class element must be admitted into the constituency; and particularly, that the claims of the honest, industrious, intelligent, and sober, must be recognised: and I know of no better general test for this than the occupation of a decent, respectable dwelling, of a certain value, which I fix at a minimum of £5; for if you refuse the franchise to the working man, simply because he is not honest, industrious, intelligent, and sober, surely you ought to apply the same rule to those in a higher grade. A general principle, therefore, must be adopted, and not an exceptional one.

If, then, we honestly wish Labour to be fairly represented, it is not easy to see how this can be accomplished without forming a third constituency; for if the franchise be lowered in counties

and boroughs, on the present system, to a rental which men not termed very extreme would advocate, it must, from the very nature of things, have the effect which all deprecate—viz., that of numerical strength overpowering property and intelligence.

All to whom I have mentioned my plan—and I have named it to many of the most intelligent politicians of all parties—have admitted the principle to be good. Some see no great difficulty in carrying it out; whilst others fear that many serious objections would be raised, and particularly by the members and electors in the boroughs which would be disfranchised,—although the members might be elected, and the electors would vote, for the districts in which such boroughs were included. But my answer to such is—if the principle be right, all difficulties in the way of its application should and may be overcome.

My only desire, in offering the foregoing suggestions, is to see the Franchise placed on a sound and enduring basis, and to set at rest the constant and irritating agitation of the Reform Question; so that there may be less party and more national feeling, and that members of Parliament may devote their minds and energies to useful legislation. If this were done, we should not see such constant changes in the Government,

to the great injury of the manifold interests and varied requirements of our vast empire; but all being actuated by a spirit of true patriotism, would support any Ministry that brought forward measures for the correction of abuses which, from the lapse of time and other causes, have crept into the various departments of Government. And thus our Legislators would, above all things, endeavour to uphold the proper dignity of the British Crown; to maintain the due balance of our unrivalled Constitution; to cherish freedom, whilst they repressed licence; to provide for and encourage social improvement and intellectual progress; and to present to the world the noble spectacle of a powerful, prosperous, united, and contented people.

ARMITAGE BRIDGE,
May, 1859.

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